The French face of Joseph Conrad

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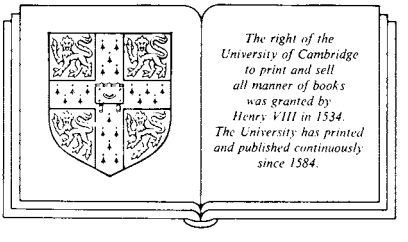

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Introduction

'La phrase "qui est des notres" m'a touché car en vérité je me sens lié à la France par une profonde sympathie.'

Conrad to H. D. Davray, 10 July 1899 (*CL*, II, p. 185)

On 6 January 1908, a dejected Conrad reported to Galsworthy the 'honourable failure' of *The Secret Agent*, adding wryly: 'I suppose there is something in me that is unsympathetic to the general public [...]. Foreignness, I suppose' (*LL*, II, p. 65). And because of that foreignness he was viewed for many decades as an isolated phenomenon on the English literary scene.[1] Fifty years after his death, at the 1974 International Conference, Edward Said could still deplore the fact that he had been 'treated as everything *except* a novelist with links to a cultural and intellectual context'.[2] Since then his relationship to the Polish, Russian, English and French traditions, as well as to a number of novelists and philosophers from other cultures, has been extensively explored; yet there is still considerable disagreement about the respective importance of the traditions behind his literary cosmopolitanism. Gustav Morf was the first to attempt to link Conrad inextricably to his Polish background,[3] an idea which, as Frederick Karl notes, has become 'increasingly influential'.[4] Although in 1947 F. R. Leavis saw him as a 'cosmopolitan of French culture',[5] ever since the 1960s Conrad has been presented as having a 'double image' and 'dual identity' – Polish (or even Slav) and English.[6] The 'double image' survives in Cedric Watts's *A Preface to Conrad* (1982), where the concept of 'janiformity' of Conrad's texts reflecting the double nature of his character tends also to be linked to a double inheritance.[7]

This over-simplification has arisen through a decades-long neglect of Conrad's French background with a consequent persisting uncertainty about the exact nature and importance of his relationship to French authors. Although there have been countless testimonies to his unremitting interest in French literature, the question of French literary influence on Conrad's work has always been vexed. Some early critics flatly rejected the idea. G. Jean-Aubry, Conrad's first biographer, declared in 1923: 'Les oeuvres de Flaubert, de Maupassant, d'Anatole France lui sont familières, sans que cependant on puisse

relever dans son oeuvre rien qui y ressemble.'[8] More often, however, after a brief acknowledgement that his masters were mainly French, their influence has been dismissed as limited. In 1916, Hugh Walpole noted that Conrad's early works, particularly *Almayer's Folly*, show the 'unmistakable' influence of the style of 'the author of *Madame Bovary*', but quickly concluded that 'his debt to Flaubert [...] can be easily exaggerated'.[9] In 1928, Richard Curle said that although Conrad 'was vividly influenced by certain French writers it would be an error to overrate' their influences, since 'they were soon transmuted by his native genius. More and more the models fade into the background and Conrad himself emerges.'[10] In 1960, Jocelyn Baines acknowledged that Conrad had 'served his apprenticeship' under Flaubert and Maupassant, but added: 'It was of course no more than an apprenticeship.'[11] Four years later, Najder commented that the influence of Flaubert and Maupassant 'was in fact doubly limited' since 'it concerned mainly matters of literary technique, and affected almost exclusively [Conrad's] early and still immature books'.[12] Such superficial judgements are still common in recent criticism. Thus, Andrzej Busza asserts that for Conrad Flaubert's writings 'represent an ideal to be aimed at and not material to be used, appropriated, or displaced'.[13] Even so meticulously analytical and language-conscious a critic as Ian Watt follows Baines and Najder when, having acknowledged that 'For Conrad the exemplary novelists were French, and, in particular, Flaubert and Maupassant', he states that after October 1898, Conrad 'was finally turning away from the French influence'.[14] And his first statement is still too much for Robert Caserio who accuses Watt of repeating 'an unexamined critical orthodoxy'.[15]

It is curious that so many critics have been, and still are, so quick to dismiss Conrad's French inheritance, despite the evidence left by his friends, in particular by his collaborator and literary confidant from 1898 to 1908, Ford Madox Ford. In *Thus to Revisit* (1921) Ford declared that 'what is cried out from every page of Mr Conrad's romances [...] is that [...] the literary influence of France is overwhelming over the style, the construction of the sentences, the cadence, the paragraph or the building up of the effects'.[16]

Whatever the reason, the fact is that Conrad criticism still suffers from the absence of a comprehensive account of his links with French writers. Although valuable scattered contributions have been made, especially since the mid 1960s, they cannot build up an overall picture in a critic's mind. The consequences of the lack of such a picture can be plainly seen in three magisterial works that appeared between 1979 and 1983: Frederick Karl's *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*, Ian Watt's *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, and Zdzisław Najder's *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*. Despite their impressive scholarship and their avowed aim of relating Conrad and his writing to the Polish, French and British cultural and literary backgrounds, these works are unable to convey anything approaching the full measure of his involvement with, and indebtedness to, the French literary tradition.

The present study, benefiting from the findings already made and adding new ones, aims to remedy that lack. It is in four parts. The first, together with the appendix, consists of a survey of Conrad's French literary and cultural background, with a detailed account of his knowledge of French writers. The second deals with the textual, stylistic and thematic influence on Conrad's fiction of a number of French authors, especially Flaubert, Maupassant and Anatole France. The third is devoted to an examination of the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the influence exerted on Conrad by those three writers. Finally, part IV takes up some of the psychological, ethical and aesthetic issues inevitably raised by the accumulated evidence, placing Conrad's methods of composition – methods which entailed transmuting other authors' fiction into his own – in a historical context of creativity and originality versus influence and tradition.

My purpose has been to remove from Conradian scholarship an important area of uncertainty which has generated nothing but sterile argument.